INTRODUCTION: FROM FALASHA TO ETHIOPIAN JEWS

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Ethiopian Jews have been arriving in ever increasing numbers in Israel since about 1979. For a number of reasons, this particular immigration has received a great deal of academic attention. It has attracted the interest of the public, who have in turn exerted pressure on the academic world to explain the phenomenon and the issues related to their absorption into Israeli society. Also, immediate concerns deriving from the difficulties associated with absorbing this population into Israeli society have created a demand for applied studies to help solve these problems.

The papers in this issue of Israel Social Science Research do not claim to present a comprehensive picture of research on Ethiopian Jews in Israel. They have been chosen to reflect as broad a range of interests as possible. They also are complementary in the sense that several of the papers deal with related themes from different viewpoints. While a broader spectrum of subjects would be desirable, we hope that this contribution to the study of Ethiopian Jewry in Israel will not only be of interest and benefit to the readers, but will also pave the way for further such efforts.

A number of studies of the Ethiopian immigration to Israel have been published. The results of still other studies are awaited. A question we must ask as social scientists and as members of the society in question is in what way these studies are relevant to the practical issue of the absorption of the Ethiopian Jewish community into Israeli society. While this is not, and cannot be, the sole criterion of worth for such studies, it must be considered as well in light of the very real problems inherent in this immigration. The reality in the current case impinges immediately on academic concerns, and in many ways affects them.

It is also important to view the immigration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel in broader contexts: their lives as Ethiopians, the experience of other waves of immigration to Israel, and the theoretical issues deriving from mass immigration in the experience of other societies.

Israel has had previous experience with waves of immigrants who have had to fit themselves in some fashion into Israeli society, and in the process have become formant forces of that society. This was the case of the mass immigration of Moroccan, Yemenite, Russian, and Georgian Jews within the past three decades. Inevitably almost, all such experiences have been problematic for both immigrant and host societies. In a society such as Israel, where the vast majority of residents are of immigrant extraction, it is critical to ask not only what effects the immigration has on the immigrant, but also on the host society. For that matter, it is necessary to examine studies of other experiences of immigration and absorption, though the issues in other countries, for a variety of reasons, are not wholly comparable. Immigration to Israel has as one component at least an ideological factor: there is a strong religious motive in much of the immigration, and the particular political and economic situation of the country and obvious and hidden factors that must be considered in analysis.

We have dealt elsewhere (Ashkenazi and Weingrod, 1983) with some of the basic issues in the immigration of Ethiopians to Israel. To summarize briefly and rather freely what has been said, the following problem areas may determine whether a

migrating group will be able to become adjusted, or in Israeli jargon "absorbed", into a host society:

1) Employment and the availability of economic resources.
2) The question of education and training.
3) The question of social acceptability by the absorbing society.
4) Whether or not traditional frameworks and institutions are maintained.
5) Psychological adaptability of the immigrants to their new situation.

Beyond these lie of course interests of more theoretical concern, only a few of which are touched on in this issue. These include knowledge about the organizational and cultural characteristics of the Ethiopian Jews (in Israel and Ethiopia), information about their world of knowledge, kinship, political organization, economics. Each of these areas (and others not mentioned) is in essence a double theme. One is the ethnohistoric reconstruction of a way of life that has rapidly crumbled and was in the midst of radical change and perhaps dissolution in Ethiopia even before immigration. The other is an understanding of social and cultural factors that operate in Israel, after the mass migration.

Previous studies of the Ethiopian Jews are relatively numerous due perhaps to the fascination the subject of Black Jews has had for Europeans. Material published before 1939 has been listed in a bibliography by Aescoly (1935-37) and more recent materials are subjects of two forthcoming works (Abbink 1985; Kaplan forthcoming). In addition to material published in the popular press, various papers published over the past years, only a few of which will be mentioned here, provide background for readers interested in a more solid grounding on the subject.

ETHNOGRAPHIC AND DESCRIPTIVE LITERATURE

Studies of the ethnographic background of the Ethiopian Jews in Ethiopia are rather sparse. It should be kept in mind that the environment of the Ethiopian Jews during much of the present century has been one of constant change, and that it is difficult to attempt to recreate "natural" ethnographies (that is, descriptions of Ethiopian Jewish society unaffected by its contacts with world and Israeli Judaism). Some notable studies include Aescoly (1943), Shellemay (1977), Schoenberger (1975), Rapoport (1980), Kahana (1977), Leslau (1957), and Messing (1982). This material is significant for the understanding of the bases of the patterns of behavior exhibited by the immigrants in their new country. Three papers published here deal with the subject. Kaplan's contribution details aspects of Ethiopian Jewish history against the background of the Beta Israel's interaction with surrounding Ethiopian culture. Rosen's paper deals with significant cultural terms in the Ethiopian Jewish experience. Abbink's paper deals with the transformation of the Beta Israel's traditional religious practices, and the Ethiopian Jews' relationship (an ambiguous and often painful one) with Israel and with normative Judaism.

ETHIOPIAN JEWS IN ISRAEL

A majority of studies over the past three years have dealt with aspects of the immigration and settlement of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, and the problems deriving

from this movement. Some of this material deals specifically with the issues – organizational, structural, political, economic, educational – deriving from the interrelationships between the main actors in the immigration process. These include Abbink (1982, 1983, 1984), Ashkenazi and Weingrod (1983) and Menuchin-Itzikson (1983) which are based upon research by anthropologists. Other papers such as the special issue of Alim (1983), consist of reports based on actual applied work by individuals engaged in the practical problems of absorption.

Halper's contribution in this issue attempts to deal with one of the most difficult problems faced by the immigrants, as well as by students of the immigration: the relationship between the immigrants and the bureaucracy. One of the significant cultural terms used by Israelis when discussing immigration generally is "the mistakes of the 50's". These "mistakes" are rarely well defined or conceptualized. Halper makes a notable attempt to identify these "mistakes" in analytic terms, and to demonstrate how these same "mistakes" are relevant as a means of understanding the process of absorption of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel today.

COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF ETHIOPIAN AND NON-ETHIOPIAN ISRAELIS

Some studies of the Ethiopian Jews not related specifically to the issues of immigration, acculturation, and absorption are in process now. Two appear here. The papers by Munitz et al. and by Schneller, discuss differences between the immigrants' natal culture, and the new one they are trying to adapt to. Perhaps because of the immediacy of the other two themes discussed, such studies are currently less well represented than they should be. In the future however we may expect more comparative-cultural studies, not necessarily by anthropologists, but, as in this volume, by specialists in other disciplines.

There are some very significant gaps in our knowledge of Ethiopian Jews and their immigration. Some of these are areas to which no serious scholar has, as yet, turned his attention.

Accurate ethnographic studies of the Ethiopian Jewish community and life in Ethiopia are scarce. While some such studies are comprehensive (e.g. Shelemay) there is little knowledge of differences between various areas of settlement, of kinship and transactional patterns, or for that matter of economic patterns both before and after the Ethiopian revolution in 1973.

As Kaplan notes in his paper in this issue, analysis of Ethiopian Jewish texts is far from complete. Little is known about the rich cultural heritage – the literature, folklore, history, scholarship – of Ethiopia's Jewish community.

There is little public information, or information available to scholars, about the process of decisions that are made by absorbing agencies (i.e. the Jewish Agency, the Ministry of Absorption) regarding the Ethiopian immigrants. Beyond the issue of the satisfaction of the immigrants themselves lies the problem, addressed partly by Halper in this issue, of what are the bases for particular social results, in the present and the near and far future.

Perhaps most important, there is an almost complete dearth of studies about the internal functioning of the Ethiopian immigrant community itself. There are currently no published reports deriving from long-term participant observation among the

immigrants (supposedly an anthropological speciality), no information regarding the formation or lack of it of new social, political, or cultural patterns among and within groups in the community.

Though it is to be expected that these areas will be covered in the future, we should be aware of their current absence.

Throughout this issue we have chosen to use the term "Ethiopian Jews" rather than "Falasha". The issues are somewhat complex – although the latter term has in the past had widespread scientific as well as popular use. Since it has derogatory connotations, we have followed the usage "Ethiopian Jews" that has become widely accepted in Israel.

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